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Elkhart (Lusher St) IN

Fifteen sites getting EPA help for bad water

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Thirteen southwest-side homes and businesses will get drinking-water filters for their TCE- and TCA-contaminated wells and two homes will hook onto city water with help from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

County health officials today announced that the EPA would provide "remedial assistance" for well-users at a ground water-contamination site on Elkhart's southwest side.

Although the EPA has not confirmed the extent of the contamination, local health officials believe the contamination is separate from the plume discovered northwest of Gemeinhardt, 57882 Ind. 19, in 1984.

"It's my opinion — and I'm not a hydrogeologist — that this is a different plume than the Gemeinhardt area. That will have to be determined by the federal government," said Mike Furfaro, a chemist/environmentalist with the Elkhart County Health Department. "It's my concern right now to help the people affected by this."

Although there's only one plume, officials have divided it into two sections, largely because the area is divided by Conrail railroad tracks that separate the homes and businesses affected into two areas.

- South of Lusher Avenue between 16th and 20th streets was affected by trichloroethylene contamination levels that ranged from 0 to 716 parts per billion.

- North of Indiana Avenue between Laramie and Avalon

streets contained contamination by 1, 1, 1, trichloroethane (TCA) levels that varied from 0 to 3,800 ppb.

The EPA recently changed the contamination levels necessary to receive Superfund assistance: TCE was reduced from 200 to 128 ppb while TCA was cut by about one-third to 500 ppb.

In addition, the EPA provides assistance to any well-user that has contamination within 50 percent of those "remedial action" levels.

Although the EPA's 84 samples confirmed initial results by the health department, both groups will draw additional samples to "fine tune" the extent of the contaminated plume.

In addition, the EPA will study the area this winter to determine what type of permanent solution the area may need.

Although only 15 sites received remedial assistance, another 40 wells were above the minimum contamination level. According to Furfaro, the EPA could eventually decide to help those well-users as well.

"We will try to obtain a permanent solution for the people not included in this change," Furfaro said, adding that it's "not unusual for some people to be excluded from the first round of Superfund action."

Because the health department was able to process its samples in its own laboratory, the EPA was able to step in more quickly, Furfaro said.

"I think we were able to bring about a quicker temporary resolution by having our laboratory go out and do saturation testing," he said.